GIAN PAOLO TERRAVECCHIA
Università degli Studi di Padova
gp.terravecchia@libero.it

THE IMPERATIVE OF REPUTATION BETWEEN SOCIAL AND MORAL NORMS*

abstract

For the philosophy of normativity, the study of reputation helps a better understanding of the conflict that may arise between social and moral norms. It is a conflict which has been discussed in recent years and which has never been treated specifically from this perspective before. The paper discusses the dilemma, firstly showing its roots and meanings and secondly giving the reasons to choose one of the alternatives. This helps to show the normative conflict between social and moral norms and to explore its complexity, presenting some solutions. In so doing, the ontology of reputation is developed and discussed, also by presenting and discussing the two forms of the imperative of reputation.

keywords

reputation, social norms, moral norms, normative conflict

Reputation, reputation, reputation! Oh, I have lost
my reputation! I have lost the immortal part of
myself, and what remains is bestial.
W. Shakespeare, *Othello*, II, 3

1. Introduction

At first glance, it may seem that reputation is a topic without philosophical depth and that all it can be said about reputation is only its extreme importance. Indeed, everybody knows that it is important to take care of one's own perceived image or to improve it. Cassio, in *Othello*, brilliantly expresses such common intuition, by calling reputation the "immortal part" of the self. On second thought, however, some interesting issues surface about reputation, such as the problem of collective reputation (e.g. Tirole, 1996), the social interpretation of the Berkelian principle "*esse est percipi*" (Carnevali, 2012). For the philosophy of normativity, the study of reputation can give a valuable contribution as well, because it helps a better understanding of the conflict that may arise between social and moral norms. It is a conflict which has been discussed in recent years and which has never been treated specifically from the perspective of reputation before (see e.g. Gilbert, 2014; Brennan *et al.*, 2013). The study of the nature of norms finds in normative conflicts important instances to understand the types of normativity and their relationships. In fact, a conflict is triggered off by the imperative of reputation, especially by its strongest version (IR2): "Act in such a way to improve your reputation". Such version poses the agent a dilemma, as we will see. If on one side, from the perspective of the normativity of sociality, the agent must comply with it, from a moral perspective, it seems he must not.

This paper discusses the dilemma, firstly showing its roots and meanings and secondly giving the reasons to choose one of the alternatives. This will help to show the normative conflict between social and moral norms and to explore its complexity, at least to certain degree. In so doing, the ontology of reputation will be developed and discussed.

2. On reputation and reputation rank

Reputation is important for the single agent and for the social networks. It is the reason for the appraisal respect, a deserved esteem grounded on features meriting such respect (Darwall 1977; 2013). It gives information about how to act and about what to expect from the persons and the things evaluated. We mostly speak about reputation of persons, but there is also a reputation for things such as wines, hotels and institutions. In a context with limited information, reputation guides the decisions, the preferences and the social stances. A good

reputation, for example, can boost the price of a good wine up to twenty times the price of similar quality wine without the same reputation (Origgi, 2016, p. 161). On the other hand, a bad reputation can be tragic, since it can cause terrible pain and even death. Consider, for example, having the reputation of dissident in Russia under Stalin, or being counted as a witch during a witch-hunt. In social philosophy, reputation can be defined as a value assigned to someone or something. Its general form is:

R: the measure of x's value perceived y, in the context c

As already said, x is not necessarily a social agent, it may be any entity, physical or social, of social interest the community should deal with. Here, the term "community" is used just to express the presence of social agents as members of a social network. This explains why, for instance, someone's glasses as such do not have a reputation, unlike the brand that has produced them. As a measure of y, reputation measures the entity x as well, but it does it always *secundum quid*. The y expresses the aspect under evaluation. For this reason, for example, one can have a very bad reputation, from a moral point of view, and yet he can be considered a great artist, or a good politician. This is important to give an account of multiple reputations of the same agent or entity. It may happen that the y under evaluation reveals something deeper, something of x, so that the reputation gained *secundum quid* ends being said *simpliciter*, without a fallacy. Usually, the general context determines what aspect y is under evaluation. For this reason, the y often remains implicit. Furthermore, the context of the evaluation is essential: the very same act could justify quite different reputations. For instance, going to a library to read books could be a very normal act, for a middle-class boy, or a matter of shame, for a professional criminal (see Goffman, 1990, p. 13). The community or, more weakly, the social network is expressed by the c in the formula. At this stage, the community plays a different role from that seen above. In the first case, the community's interest is a necessary condition for x to have a reputation, instead here the community plays the role of perceiving the value and conserving its measure. Finally, the reputation is not simply the value in itself, assuming that there is such a thing, rather the *socially perceived* value (of course, not said in a sensistic way). It is also important to notice that the social network measures and conserves the reputation in a nonlinear way (see e.g. the Matthew effect, Merton, 1968). This opens, within the social ontology, the important field – yet to be studied – of the distinction between grounded and ungrounded reputations.

The general form of reputation, despite some superficial similarities, should not be confused with Searle's Status Function Declaration, "X counts as Y in C" (Searle, 2010). The most obvious distinction, from a speech act perspective, is that R is not a Declaration, though it can be expressed through such a social device. "I give this Chianti 2013: 96" is a declaration that states a rating which, given by a recognized expert such as Robert Parker, spreads through the network and influences the wine stakeholders, saying that Chianti 2013 is excellent. One should however notice that even Parker does not have the power to state *the* reputation, though he can deeply influence the value collectively perceived. The reputation is a quality that emerges from the social network, so that there is no single social agent able to fully control it. Furthermore, from the point of view of ontology, the distinction is that while the Status Function Declaration institutes the social *entity*, the R formula gives the measure of a social *quality*. Therefore, they are irreducible to one another.

Reputation is not pursued just as such, but always in comparison with the reputation level of the peers. It is not an absolute value; it is always contingent, and relative to context and time. This establishes a mobile rank system and with it the agent has the possibility to desire to increase its own position. A well-recognized physician, for example, could be striving

to increase his reputation, as high as it may be, if he is in competition with a well-known colleague. A good reputation, if not confirmed through time, could fade away and it usually does, especially when time decreases the fitness. For this reason, for example, the reputation of a good soccer player is destined to lower as he grows old or if it turns out he is not training properly. A good reputation gives good opportunities or at least provides the evaluated entity with a good social rank within the field of the matter evaluated. The general ranking rule (RR) is that the higher the rank, the better the accessible opportunities.

3. The imperative to improve the reputation and the moral refusal of it

Considering RR, it is not surprising that people try hard to maintain and even to improve their reputation. The imperative of reputation comes into two versions. The first is "Act in such a way to maintain your good reputation" (IR1) and the other, of course, is: "Act in such a way to improve your reputation" (IR2). The second is usually more demanding and challenging for the agent in charge (who could be, for example, a marketing department employee). The adoption of one rather than the other imperative depends on social pressures on the agent and on its ambition. These two imperatives (IR1 and IR2) are social norms. Indeed, they both depend on the need to conserve and eventually promote a social rank: their goal is to influence strategically the social network. Such imperatives are blind to values and to moral good. This, of course, does not mean they are immoral, but just that they are premoral or, better, social. They are relevant both for charitable organisations or businessmen and for professional killers or ravagers. A professional killer, while hiding his true identity, will do his best to let the "right" people, from his point of view, know about his deeds. There may seem to be social reasons not to comply with IR, because "nothing is so unimpressive as behaviour designed to impress" (Elster, 1983, p. 66). Elster's remark, however, does not harm IR as such, in neither of its forms, it just shows the disaster of a strategic behaviour, unsuccessful in hiding its true goals.

The moral refusal of IR, on the other side, especially in its strongest version (IR2), for the sake of brevity could be designated as the anti-whitewashed tomb law (Mt 23,27). The strategic behaviour, even when it respects other moral laws and derived maxims (e.g. not to harm the people that could reveal the agent's trick, Origgi, 2016, p. 1), seems to be at least morally questionable. The social agent is not just ignoring the virtues of modesty and temperance, it is on the threshold of pride. Acting selfishly, it pursues its own interests to improve its appearances, if necessary despite the truth. It becomes fake, losing itself in a lie. The other people are manipulated through the strategic action which tries to hide the truth or to sell the appearance as true. The problem with IR is not with its ends, but with it as a rule to be followed. If one increases his own reputation, good for him. The problem arises when IR becomes the only or main reason for action. What can be fine and acceptable if it is an unintentional consequence of an intentional act, is here rejected if it is intentionally pursued. The increase of reputation should be supervenient on acts aimed at ends other than reputation. The *parvenu* is sanctioned by the community because he tries hard to gain a reputation not supported by his modest origins. There is a social sanction, because he tries to occupy a place in the social network he is not truly deserving. But this is not all. There is also a moral sanction in so far as the *parvenu* is trying, usually with modest if not hilarious results, to hide his origins. This attempted deception is morally regrettable.

4. The ways out of the dilemma

IR, on one side, and the anti-whitewashed tomb law, on the other, pose the social agent a difficult dilemma. It is not the simplistic alternative between *being* (authenticity) or *having*, in this case a good reputation (Fromm, 1973), where to be morally good one must choose the first. In fact, from the ontology of reputation, since reputation is a *perceived* value, it seems to be morally legitimate to improve a perception which is not committed to any objective value.

Where would the lie be, if there were no objective value the reputation should restrict to? If, in the social reality, *esse est percipi*, the perceived reputation is the truth. Also, social motives are often connected with the moral ones. And indeed, from a moral perspective, gaining a better reputation or maintaining a good one could help doing good things. For example, the Catholic Church had to deal with a moral dilemma initially solved covering cases of sexual abuse to avoid a crisis of consciences, as it turned out from 2002. To defend its reputation was a matter of moral rather than social concern. Or, on the other side, for a corporation to lose its good name because of a scandal, could trigger an economic crisis off, with workers fired. That is why there could be moral reasons aside the social ones for IR. After all, the reasons that make not clear which of the horns to choose are not weak, and that is why many adopted and tend to adopt IR as pre-empting its alternative.

A first classical way out of the dilemma comes from the field of the social normativity according to which it is necessary to stop increasing the reputation, to stop pursuing IR2. Its reason is the potential collapse of reputation, which results after the discovery of a fake. This also shows that in social reality *esse* is not just *percipi* and that an ungrounded reputation could be a serious problem to deal with. The mechanism of the reaction to betrayed trust punishes those who brag. From this perspective, the prudential need not to get an ungrounded reputation comes from self-interest, it is strategic and not moral. To have a reputation of a boaster is negative. At the same time and on the contrary, it is useful to be considered someone who avoids getting an ungrounded reputation. These two moments, the negative and the positive, are strong mechanisms for a strategic self-limitation. Also, it is important to consider that this is not effective with IR1 which already realizes a moderate attitude.

A second way out of the dilemma comes from the idea that moral normativity pre-empts social normativity in case of a conflict. Social bonds and social networks can become hell for mankind without the moral care for the good (Sartre, 1944).

For this reason, IR can be applied up to the point where it does not enter into conflict with what is required by morality.

REFERENCES

Brennan, G., Eriksson, L., Goodin, R.E., & Southwood, N. (2013). *Explaining norms*. Oxford: Oxford University Press;

Carnevali, B. (2012). *Le apparenze sociali. Una filosofia del prestigio*. Bologna: il Mulino;

Darwall, S. (1977). Two kinds of respect. *Ethics*, 88, 36-49;

Darwall, S. (2013). *Honor, history and relationship*. Oxford: Oxford University Press;

Elster, J. (1983). *Sour grapes. Studies in the subversion of rationality*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press;

Fromm, E. (1976). *To have or to be?* London: Bloomsbury;

Gilbert, M. (2014). *Joint commitment: How we make the social world*. Oxford: Oxford University Press;

Goffman, E. (1959). *The presentation of self in everyday Life*. London: Penguin Books;

Goffman, E. (1990). *Stigma: Notes on the management of spoiled identity*. London: Penguin Books;

Merton, R.K. (1968). The Matthew effect in science. *Science*, 159, 56-63;

Origgi, G. (2016). *La reputazione: Chi dice che cosa di chi*. Milano: Egea;

Sartre, J.P. (1944). *Huis Clos and other plays*. London: Penguin Books;

Searle, J.R. (2010). *Making the social world: The structure of human civilization*. Oxford: Oxford University Press;

Tirole, J. (1996). A Theory of collective reputations (with applications to the persistence of corruption and to firm quality). *Review of Economic Studies*, 63, 1-22.